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Tracing Bigfoot

Leo Rossmassler Kepcke

Stand by Me: *The author outside the Bigfoot Museum in Willow Creek.*

I went searching for Bigfoot. More specifically, I went to the mythical home of Bigfoot, searching for the effect that the legend has had on the local culture. After a picturesque drive into the Six Rivers National Forest, I arrived at Willow Creek, the gateway to Bigfoot Country. In 1963, Albert Hodgson made a cast of a "Bigfoot" footprint that he found near Bluff Creek on a little sandbar. Thus started the modern legend of Bigfoot in Humboldt County. Shortly after, in 1967, Roger Patterson and Bob Gimlin made their famous and contentious Bigfoot film close by. Today, tourists can purchase their own plaster cast of the original footprint just a few yards from a two-story redwood statue of the legend itself. Boasting thousands of footprints and many sightings, Willow Creek and its surrounding area make a convincing claim to the "Bigfoot Capital" title.

A carved wood sign near the Willow Creek tourist information center tells the story of Oh Mah, the Hupa name for Bigfoot, whose footprints have been found countless times throughout the last 50 years. This sign claims that reports of Oh Mah have been consistent and similar in the last hundred years. Whatever the facts behind Bigfoot, Willow Creek has capitalized on the legend, reviving the small, former logging town to the prominence it once enjoyed. Murals and carved redwood statues depicting Bigfoot have replaced the millions of board feet of redwood as the major industry of the area. In any other town, a steakhouse, a bookstore, an outdoor gear repair shop, and a motel would share little or nothing in common. However, in Willow Creek the Bigfoot brand unites these businesses.

Caught on Film: *Bigfoot as captured by the infamous Patterson-Gimlin duo.*

It is easy to see why a reclusive and elusive humanlike creature would live in the vast wilderness that is the Six Rivers National Forest. I left Willow Creek and the carved redwood burls behind, heading for the great outdoors and the flesh-and-

Left: *A mural on Ace Hardware in Willow Creek.* ***Right:*** *The Early Bird, home of the Bigfoot Burger, Willow Creek.*

blood version of a creature that cannot possibly be captured in wood. Driving toward Fish Lake, hosting the greatest number of Bigfoot sightings, I swung a left off Highway 96 and proceeded west six miles up a windy road. A small trail through the pines led to a small, unidentified lake. The water was glassy and clear, the air felt clean in my lungs, and the surrounding pines were still. A woodpecker tapping out the only sound on a nearby tree sparked thoughts of Bigfoot hiding just beyond my sight. The forest stretching endlessly before me seemed like the perfect place for a reclusive creature to live out its days in privacy.

> *Bigfoot is always with me, manifesting as my inner desire to return to nature.*

"Where is he?" I wondered aloud.

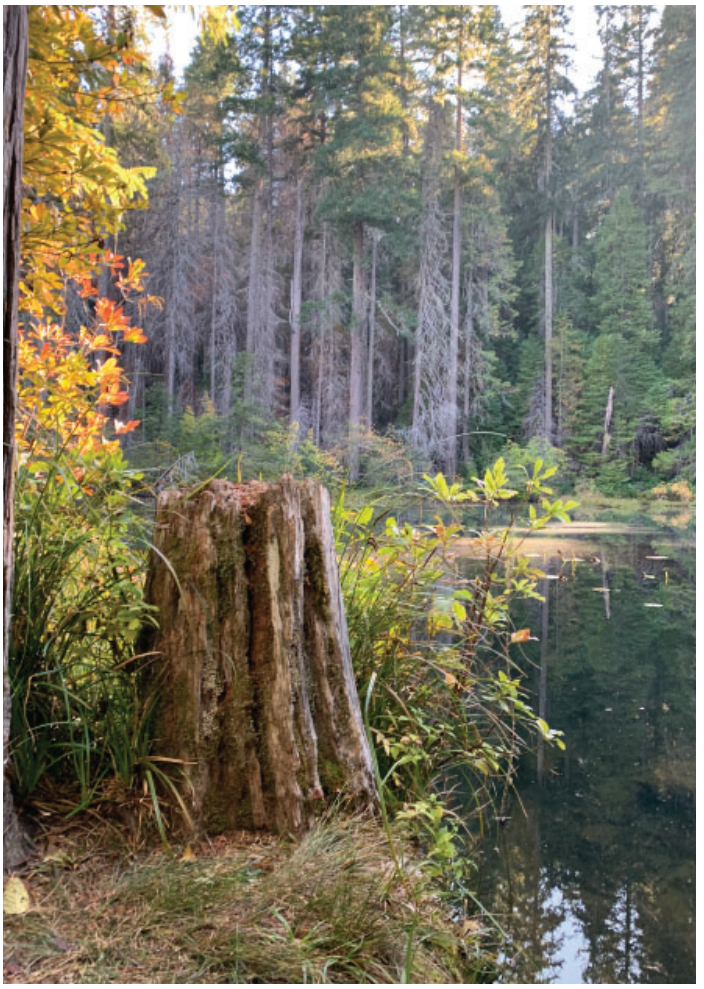
And soon it dawned on me: Bigfoot is always with me, manifesting as my inner desire for a return to nature.

Myths of wild man-creatures have been present in human cultures for hundreds of years. The most famous are the Yeti, Abominable Snowman, Sasquatch, and Bigfoot. Himalayan folklore gives the name Metoh-Kangmi to the creature that became known as the Abominable Snowman after British explorer Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Howard-Bury found tracks similar to those of a barefooted human high in the Himalayas, subsequently coining the term in his book *Mount Everest: The Reconnaissance, 1921*. Similar legends can be found throughout the Pacific Northwest, told by the indigenous groups who describe a similar wild man with varying names, temperaments, and dispositions toward humans. The Lummi, in northwestern Washington, call the creature Ts'emekwes, and while some regions harbor stories of a more threatening creature, it is generally described as being rather benign.

Human-creatures also appear in Basque, Slavic, and Central European folklore throughout the ages. The earliest dates back to the ancient city of Uruk in Sumer with the stories of Enkidu, a wild man who is shown in juxtaposition and friendship with Gilgamesh. The description given in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is eerily similar to Bigfoot: "His body was rough, he had long hair like a woman's; it waved like the hair of Nisaba, the goddess of corn. His body was covered with matted hair like Samugan's, the god of cattle. He was innocent of mankind; he knew nothing of the cultivated land." Enkidu was created as a reflection of Gilgamesh, one which could rival the great leader in both strength and wisdom. Just as nature has rivaled humankind since the agricultural revolution.

Walking through the environs surrounding Willow Creek, I felt the wild all around. This was not some curated forest with manicured paths. This was the wild, single-track forest, a place where Bigfoot might be lurking anywhere.

Legends of Bigfoot and his cousins in other cultures pop up in intersections between the wilderness and the far reaches of human civilization. Is this because the most elusive zoological mystery in recent history



Stompin' Ground: *A lake found while hunting the legend.*

deliberately teases us by living on the fringes of society? Or could there be a more logical explanation: The rise of Bigfoot and his ilk are the product of a counterculture responding to the increased urbanization that has swept the world in the last century. Or do we, the "civilized," create myths that highlight the contrast between our manufactured culture and the natural order to celebrate or condemn the disparity between them?

I tread a path around this small lake, seeming to set the first human footprints in quite some time. It was an energizing feeling, one of wild exploration and rough-and-tumble life in the woods. I had plenty of time to think between the careful steps down a leaf-strewn hillside and around the very edge of a beautiful lake. Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, authors of *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, contend that "these stories often survive as receptacles of important cultural values." No matter the origin, people believe in Bigfoot because they want to. They want to keep mystery alive in a scientific era where questions are being answered before the average person can even formulate them.

Winding my way around this picturesque lake, I began to feel a growing sensation of being left behind. Do we collectively feel that our culture has removed us from nature, that we must maintain and create legends and myths to reconnect us with a past we have left far behind?

The answer: yes.

And we see no better proof of this than in rural Humboldt County, where these legends make a home. Willow Creek has certainly taken the "Bigfoot Capital" title to heart, hosting an annual Bigfoot Days festival every Labor Day weekend, when Bigfoot enthusiasts congregate to celebrate the mythical creature. Here, Bigfoot explorers and believers mingle in the gateway to the country where they find their joy. People love the magic the unknown brings. And Bigfoot is just that: unknown and magical. Believers hold their hopes and fears close together with the legend of Bigfoot, for some these myths reflect what could have been and what some of us even hope for. The return to a lifestyle in harmony with nature is an appealing idea, and myths of humanoids who live it have stayed with our culture for 15,000 years. This suggests that it is closer to our hearts than just a passing fancy in the modern age of urbanization.

In *A Short History of Myth*, Karen Armstrong contends, "Mythology was therefore designed to help us cope with the problematic human predicament." Does this mean that creatures like Bigfoot really exist? Or is it evidence of a subconscious cultural rebellion throughout the ages, humans chafing against increasingly urbanized surroundings and producing antithetical legends to both frighten and excite? Bigfoot exists in our mind, in the collective consciousness of culture. For some, Bigfoot is an entertaining myth. For others, Bigfoot is a treasure waiting to be discovered by a worthy explorer. For me, Bigfoot is hope. Hope that one day humankind can have a symbiotic relationship with nature once again.